

Spring 5-8-1997

# What Can We Learn About Resilience From Women Who Survived the Great Depression?

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MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK  
AUGSBURG COLLEGE  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the Master's Thesis of:

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has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirements for the  
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## **DEDICATION**

The impetus for this work came from a woman of the 1930s. She lived through the Great Depression years by taking in laundry and boarders and by sewing and re-making clothes for her sons. She taught herself to drive, sang at countless weddings and funerals, and rarely missed a church service. She lived her life as though it were a mission, involving herself in the community as need be. She was truly a woman of resilience. This work is lovingly dedicated to Gladys Genevive Johnson Hofstad, my grandmother.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

As anyone who has completed a work such as a thesis knows there are many people who have been supportive in the process. I would like to thank those who have been here for me, not only through this work but for the past two years. My husband, children and family rank first, along with my wonderful women's group and women friends. I also need to thank and acknowledge my classmates who have ALWAYS been able to understand what it's like to be in graduate school!

## ABSTRACT

### **What can we learn about resilience from women who survived the great depression?**

Vicky LH Follansbee

May 8, 1997

The following historical study explored the characteristic of resilience or inner strength in women who survived the Great Depression. For the purpose of this study, women were limited to white working class. The research attempted to discover variables that supported resilience and propelled women into survival mode. Women searched desperately for employment and food to feed their families. How did women cope with extremities produced by the Depression? Using content analysis, this qualitative study examined historical documents in search of common factors that aided and supported resilience in women.

The data revealed story after story of hardship that forced women to deal with long term adversity. The data did not address the presence of nor offer explanation about inner strength and resilience. This study addressed the importance in creating awareness of one's resilience through two theoretical perspectives. It also discussed implications for future study in social work policy and practice.

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**"I am a woman come to speak for you.  
I am a woman speaking for us all.."**

From the Rites of Ancient Ripening, by Meridel LeSueur

## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

**Historical Overview** In the early twentieth century, the Great Depression and the decade of the 1930s taxed the strength, courage, hope, and the very life of individuals across the country. People young and old, female and male, lost jobs, lost possessions and many lost their self-respect. "The disease of deprivation spread with such speed and across so many lines that there were few families in the U. S. who did not either experience or witness pain" (Watkins, 1993). One of those families, the author's grandparents and father, lived in rural northwest Iowa, surviving meagerly by working in small businesses. In nineteen seventy nine, my grandmother, Gladys Johnson Hofstad, died and nearly sixty years worth of diaries she kept came into my possession. It was interest in her life, who she was, and how she survived the Depression years that fueled my own historical fervor and desire to know more. Wanting to know her as a white working class woman, mother, sister, friend and community member through her words, keenly sparked the following work.

Though my grandmother's family did not fall apart as many family structures did during the Depression years, they struggled daily to make ends meet. Some families dissolved completely for a plethora of reasons directly related to loss

of income, loss of job, loss of home, or inability to pay rent. For many, work was nearly impossible to find as countless women and men were cut back in hours, or pay, or laid off entirely. Forced to secure any form of paid labor, some took positions they would not have considered under normal circumstances. Others could not find work for months, even years at a time. The devastation of the Great Depression left many people without resources or means to survive. Men, and in some cases women, abandoned their families. People fell into depressed states of mind, and some took their own lives, "the suicide rate rose 25% in four years (Bauman & Coode, 1988, p. 5)," while others were able to survive, somehow drawing on inner strength or sheer will.

The Great Depression did not stop most women. Working class women, and wives of working class men came together in small and large groups across the country using their skills to organize. They came together in support of common needs by organizing boycotts, demonstrations, barter networks and food delivery systems (Evans, 1989; Orleck, 1993). According to Orleck (1993) and Cayton, Gorn and Williams (1993), women organized for political, economic and health reasons. In cities across the US., New York, Seattle, Richmond and Flint, Michigan women took a stand. Societal attitudes toward organized and working women ranged from skepticism to anger. Though some women actually were communist, labeling many women as communist became a way of scapegoating.

The Depression derailed peoples' lives, tearing apart families and terminating employment. "Now, if it had been me, I'd of went right away and got another kind of work." "I tell you there isn't any such thing as being idle for people if they have any gumption. Some people won't work, too proud, too choosy or else they're lazy" (Calkins, 1930, p. 8). Not only did families change structure, they "also fell apart from the strains of the Depression" (Helmbold, 1987, p. 629). Abramovitz (1988) Case Study (1928) and Trolander (1975) give account about how the Depression forced relationships to crumble. "...female self-sacrifice resulted in conflict between parents and daughters, between husbands and wives, among members of doubled-up households, and between unattached women and their children and siblings" (Helmbold, p. 629).

Individuals in social service work and in Settlement Houses around the country witnessed the Depression's fallout on a daily basis. Previously working at home, married women tried to find employment when their laid-off spouses could not. A mother of thirteen children, nine of whom were living, "did a day's work when able" reported a worker at Northeast Neighborhood House in Minneapolis. The worker stated the mother was a "picture of stolid courage and independence in the face of extreme hardship and loss of opportunity" (Case Study, p. 1).

It was not unusual for husbands to leave families in search of employment. Many did not return, leaving the

woman and children to struggle alone, which often meant moving in with a family member. Helmbold (1987) illustrates the additional hardship for women and their families forced to double-up, with the added expectation older children also find work. How did women move ahead in the face of inordinate adversity?

For the purpose of this study and in reflection of the data sources utilized, "women" refers generally to white working-class women. Some data used in the study comes from diaries of the author's grandmother, a woman and mother from a white working-class family. The study acknowledges that African American women, farm women, Native American women, Latino women, immigrant women, lesbian women and *all* women affected by the Great Depression, regardless of age, class or living situation, suffered major loss and injustice. Further, the study acknowledges the presence of racism, sexism, lack of education, being dis-abled and many other barriers women faced, coupled with excessive hardships generated by the Depression. This study does not specifically address these issues.

**Woman's Place** The Great Depression forced people into survival mode requiring an extreme level of strength and fortitude. "The mood in that long cold winter of 1932-1933 was gloom - unrelieved, despairing gloom" (Bernstein, 1970, p. 14). By 1933, 15 million workers had lost their jobs (Abramovitz, 1988; Bauman & Coode, 1988; Evans, 1989; Woloch,



1984). Because gender division in labor was the norm, the paid labor force majority was male. Jobs that were open to women were either domestically focused, service oriented such as sewing or cleaning, or teaching or charity work (Abramavitz, 1988; Evans, 1989; Westin, 1976). Working women invoked criticism and ridicule (Orleck, 1993), especially if they were middle to upper class European American women. Legislation "prohibited or limited" married women from working (Evans, 1989) and "80% of Americans" believed home was the proper place for women.

During this era, when males were considered the "breadwinners," women were expected to maintain the home by way of cooking, cleaning, and performing other domestic tasks. If mothers, women were also expected to bear the brunt of child rearing. In the crisis of the Depression, women secured various forms of paid employment, usually away from home. "In those common experiences of wives, both mothers and workers," LeSueur defines a source of "women's strength" (1927-1980, p. 135). With loss of income in many families, wives, sisters and older daughters went to work. Though the income was desperately needed, this scenario most often meant shame and humiliation for the family, particularly, if the "breadwinner" was male. Men across the country lost jobs, income, and for many men, a purpose in life (Bennett & Elder, 1979). "Jobs were at such a premium that a woman took any job at any pay, just to be able to buy bread" (Polacheck, 1989, p. 169). Children's need for food

and milk drove many women to take whatever work they could find. This desperate situation sometimes meant leaving those same children to fend for themselves. Older children were routinely forced to leave school to find work and earn a few extra dollars for the family. Sometimes the child's income was the only income in the home. The "economic pressures of the era combined with household needs continued to play a central role in structuring the worklife of working mothers" (Bennett & Elder, 1979, p. 154).

**Statement of Problem** How did women of the Depression survive, maintain their sanity and fulfill the expectations placed on them by society and family? What role, if any, did resilience play in a woman's survival? What aided and supported the Depression women, shoring up their resilience? This historical study focused on strengths women utilized, while it explored the breadth of resilience. The research attempted to discover what variables may have assisted women in maintaining and supporting their resilience.

**Research Purpose/Significance** The purpose of this study was to investigate avenues that supported and described how resilience played a primary role in women's survival. The literature presented some common themes about Depression Era women as well as individual portraits of many women. What were sources of personal strength for women? Where did their resilience come from and how was it supported? What

variables factored into women maintaining resilience?

Historical literature (Trolander 1975, & Woloch, 1984), has shown that indeed women did survive. *How* exactly this was accomplished is not addressed in the literature. What did women do that allowed them to be strong? If resilience bolstered women on their way through the Depression years, how can we learn about this phenomenon in a way that teaches other women, young and old? This study attempted to view the portraits of women collectively in an effort to give voice to the legacy given by our foremothers, that is, to recognize resilience as a resource to be tapped.

**Summary** As briefly described, the Great Depression was a monumental period in our nation's history. Occurring nearly seventy years ago, the legacy left is with us today. Women were called upon by society, by themselves and by the era in which they lived, to pull together collectively as a way to move through that hardship. Women did 'pull together' using skills that enhanced resilience, as the next chapter describes.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

**Defining Resilience** There are many considerations to make regarding resilience, the Great Depression, and women who survived. To begin with, cultural and societal expectations imposed domesticity upon women, requiring them to remain at home despite hardships experienced living on a meager income. The data reviewed tell us that in spite of many hardships, women did what they could to survive the times including bringing income into the home. Helmbold, (1987) and Cayton, Gorn and Williams (1993), discuss extreme resourcefulness called upon by women, a trait many shared though they ran into barriers day after day. How did women gather up their strength, their resilience?

Finding out specifically what resilience means is another consideration. Definitions of resilience vary some but generally speak of the ability to "bounce back." Dorset and Baber's (1993) dictionary definition states, "1. the act of leaping or springing back; a rebounding... 2. the quality of being resilient; bounce or spring back into shape, position, etc. after being pressed or stretched; elasticity. 3. the ability to recover strength, spirits, good humor, etc. quickly; buoyancy" (p. 1540). The American Heritage Dictionary states that being resilient means "1. Capable of returning to an original shape after being bent, stretched or compressed; elastic. 2. Recovering quickly, as from misfortune or illness" (p. 586).

In considering resilience from a study of older women, Wagnild and Young (1990) found that women "following adversity, can bounce back. The concept of resilience connotes emotional stamina and has been used to describe persons who display courage and adaptability in the wake of life's misfortunes" (p. 254). The aspects of resilience encompass the ability to adapt to the situation. Women of the thirties did so with resourcefulness, using whatever mental or physical means they had.

**Protective Factors** In the past decade, several studies looking at children have taken place involving "resilience" and "protective factors" (Benson, 1993; Garmezy & Masten, 1986; Molony 1995; Rak & Patterson 1996; Rutter, 1987; Wagnild & Young, 1990; ). A study conducted by Garmezy & Masten, "linked concepts of risk, vulnerability and protective factors" (p. 509). Identified attributes such as, *hardiness, autonomy, positive social orientation, self-esteem and related qualities, absence of family discord, external adult support*, (p. 511), according to the study, lessened risk of maladaptive behavior, "...the study of risk and protective factors that seemingly influence the development of competent or maladaptive behavior" (Garmezy & Masten, 1986 p. 501). Guetzloe (1994) reports in longitudinal studies of "offspring of schizophrenics" (p. 3), that similar, recurring themes such as, *an easy temperament, presence of a trusting adult, informal support, creativity and collaborative*

*programs*, have aided these children in their "abilities to thrive under the most adverse circumstances" (p. 3).

**Resilience and Women** Historians agree that the Great Depression "challenged adaptive powers of American Families" (Bauman & Coode, 1988), and that women did what they needed in order to survive. What can be observed is that women demonstrated inordinate strength and resilience. Working class women and women who were not gainfully employed sought other means of survival if a paid job was inaccessible. They took in boarders, did sewing, laundry and cleaning for other people; they baked, patched clothes, re-used every piece until there was nothing left but rags (Helmbold, 1987; Hofstad, 1934; Westin, 1976). Women learned how to 'make do' with what was available to them. A mother of nine living children reported, "Susan and Neda will have to stay out of school as they have no shoes or over-shoes. I cannot patch the clothes any more, they are all patches" (Case Study, 1928). "Historically invisible average women learned to make do or do without" (Westin, 1976, p. ix).

Providing food and clothing for ones family became a huge challenge. "In middle-class homes across the country women planted vegetables instead of flowers; quilted with neighbors; begged feed and flour sacks for dress material and learned to stretch a husband's salary that was cut 40% in 1932" (p. x). Some how women managed to get used to having much less in their lives, "They had an unassuming courage:

'We had no choice. We just did what had to be done one day at a time" (p. 4). "Oh there's a lot of ways to do, when you have to. When you have to do, you'll do" (Zandy, 1990, p. 85). According to Westin, a familiar saying went, "use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without" (1976, p. ix).

Amid adapting to the situation, "a host of American writers and social scientists expressed concern about the social and psychological resiliency of the nations basic institution - the family" (Bauman & Coode, 1988, p. 71). The Depression cut an enormous swath across every age and class of women. Some were able to adapt, while others were not. A young 18 year old mother of two for example, was abandoned by her husband, and sent by her father to live with her grandmother. When the "grandmother left to help a dying sister" (Westin, p. 32), the 18 year old had no place to stay, no job and no money. She was told at the relief office her "husband should be paying alimony" (p. 32). When friends who were looking after the babies while the woman searched for work "went to the law" claiming neglect, the children were immediately taken, adopted out and never seen again (Westin, 1976). For a variety of reasons, the 18 year old could not adapt, try as she may. "By 1932 over one million wives (and children) had been deserted by out of work men" (Westin, 1976, p. ix).

For many, adapting to the environment did not come easy. "What I remember most is what the Depression did to the spirit of people" (Westin, 1976, p. 127). "The suicide rate

rose 25% in four years, 38 states closed their banks..." (Bauman & Coode, 1988, p. 5). "Bank closed this morning. Made quite a sad feeling town" (Hofstad, 1931). "There was a mood then, you just lived from one day to the next, always wondering what was going to happen next" (Westin, 1976, p. 201).

The women who did exhibit resilient traits, who managed to adapt, seemed to share experiences around which themes and patterns could be arranged. Three bold themes were discovered that were repeated in the data: women networked and supported one another, women worked and organized themselves, and women were scapegoated. Regardless of the theme that developed, women displayed resilience and adaptability. "Resilience is a quality inherent to all human beings...it is our most powerful tool in our ability not only to survive but to thrive" (O'Gorman, 1994, p. 10). Whether resilience was innate or gained through the Depression experience, in some way it helped women navigate their way through the thirties. The most common theme centered around the 'networks and relationships' with which women supported one another. For example, networks of "female friends" who shared a common experience in Settlement Houses and other reform organizations "had mutual support and understanding which they supplied one another" (Evans, 1989; Trolander, 1975). Women of the 1930s learned to rely on one another, and on relationships in their lives with other people, parents, siblings, husbands, friends, and in raising children



and caring for others. They also found solace in their faith (Evans, 1989; Hofstad, 1935; Molony, 1995; Westin, 1976). Gladys Hofstad had extensive networks of friends, family, her faith community and even strangers. She rarely spent two days in a row without speaking or visiting friends and acquaintances.

Using relationships as well as skill to organize, women raised their voices against the economic injustice of the Depression. Together they set up large scale barter networks and established charities for food, clothing, soup kitchens and flophouses (Evans, 1989; Molony, 1995; Orleck, 1993). "From the late 1920's through the 1940's, there was a remarkable surge of activism by working-class American housewives...and poor wives and mothers" who staged food boycotts and anti-eviction demonstrations, lobbying for rent and food price controls (Evans, 1989; LeSueur, 1982; Orleck, 1993). Women needed one another to be in relationship with, to help support one another through the horrendous times. According to Orleck (1993), during the Depression years, women organized on an level unprecedented in the history of the United States.

The third theme, women being "scapegoated," took shape in a sundry of ways. Women as workers did not get the good paying jobs, and because they were women, the low wage jobs paid them even less. Most of the low wage jobs were work men would not do, though women were accused of "taking jobs away from men" (Evans, 1989). "Three million of the estimated

thirteen million unemployed in 1932 were women" (Westin, 1976). Historically, unemployed women were virtually invisible. Rarely were they seen in "breadlines" or at soup kitchens. "It's an awful situation to have nothing to eat. The veery air seems to become malignant, fear and defeat sit in you" (LeSueur, 1934-1938, Vol.25). There were no "flophouses" for women as there were for men. "Where does a woman go when she's hungry and out of work? A woman will shut herself up in a room until it is taken away from her and eat a cracker a day and be as quiet as a mouse" (LeSueur, 1977).

Women were scapegoated via the media which did not recognize womens needs. One newspaper made fun of Eleanor Roosevelt's efforts to support and raise public awareness about the need for legislation to help women and children. The paper referred to the White House as "becoming Hull House" on Pennsylvania Avenue (Woloch, 1984). The issues women faced did not receive serious attention by media or the general public. Additionally women were scapegoated by a society who believed a woman's proper place was in the home. In the patriarchial society of the 1930s, most women received unequal treatment.

**Theoretical/Conceptual Framework** The data were interpreted through two theoretical frameworks; the Ecological/Systems model, a social work perspective and Feminist Standpoint Theory. The concept of resilience, as

defined by experts in the field, was seen through the filter of both frameworks.

### Ecological/Systems Theory

Ecological/Systems Theory has grown out of the person-in-environment perspective and the science of ecology, which studies the relations between organisms and their environment (Compton & Galoway, 1994; Germain, 1991; Hepworth & Larson, 1993). The conceptual framework looks at "relationship between paired variables (does the environment cause the person to behave in a certain way?)", as opposed to a "cause-and-effect relationship" (Compton & Galoway, 1994, p. 118). The ecological/systems concept is strongly grounded in "adaptability", both as individuals adapting to their environment and the environment adapting to the individuals. Germain (1991) stresses that "relationship is characterized by continuous reciprocal exchanges or transactions, in which people and environments influence, shape, and sometimes change each other" (p. 16). Hepworth and Larson (1993) equate ecological theory with "problem solving efforts... directed to assisting people to adapt to their environments (e.g., training them in interpersonal skills), or altering environments to meet the needs of clients more adequately (e.g., enhancing both the attractiveness of a nursing home and the quality of its activities), or a combination of the two" (p. 267).

### Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist theories portray slightly different points of view while emphasizing issues relevant to women. Some examples are, liberal feminism, radical feminism and social feminism. More focused feminism includes cultural feminism, African American Womanism, lesbian feminism and global feminism. At one end of the spectrum is liberal feminism which helped outlaw sex discrimination and contest sexual harassment...(Saulnier, 1996). Some see it as only addressing "white-middle-class privileged women's needs" (Saulnier, 1996, p. 19). At the other end of the spectrum is radical feminism, believing among other things, that patriarchy is the root of women's oppression (Saulnier, 1996).

One of many feminist theories, Feminist Standpoint Theory offered another alternative. Feminist Standpoint Theory argues that, "knowledge is meant to be grounded in experience" (Saulnier, 1996, p. 140). "A standpoint is a position in society, involving a level of awareness about an individual's social location, from which certain features of reality come into prominence and from which others are obscured. Standpoint theory begins with the idea that the less powerful members of society experience a different reality as a consequence of their oppression" (Swigonski, 1994, p. 390). Though women were less powerful in the Depression society, they were ripe with knowledge that was grounded in their individual and collective experiences,

"knowledge for knowledge's sake is believed to be both desirable and possible" (Swigonski, 1994, p. 388). Conversely, Davis (1994) challenges the rationale of applying many different theories to differences in one's reality, which is the essence of what standpoint theory suggests.

**Application of Theories** Perhaps application of Ecological Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory may assist in addressing the research question: what can we learn about resilience from women who survived the Great Depression? Numerous examples of survival have been cited. Ecologically, the environment of the Depression ranged from homelessness and flophouses to poor, poverty stricken individuals and families, to conditions of just surviving, getting by hand to mouth. Women and families were forced to double-up and share small living spaces, or in some cases, forced by circumstances to leave their homes. According to the literature women did "adapt to their environments" or "altered environments to meet the needs" (Compton & Galoway, 1994). Altering the environment was seen at one level in homes as furniture, carpets, personal possessions and appliances were sold or repossessed. Women did what they had to, "in evening an old lady came and wanted to rent the two corner rooms upstairs, so I rented it" (Hofstad, 1935), including sharing their space with strangers.

Ecological theory is firmly based in adaptability suggesting a relationship between "organisms and their

environment characterized by continuous reciprocal exchanges" (Compton & Galoway, 1994; Germain, 1991). According to the literature, women did adapt to the Depression environment with reciprocal exchanges. They sewed clothes out of feed and flour sacks, patching and re-using every scrap; they supported one another in order to and survive the depressed times. Depression women went to work in historic numbers through confusion of mixed messages about 'helping out' and 'the proper place' of being at home. Women supported one another by organizing against high food and rent prices, by bartering and by making personal issues public. Ecologically, women adapted to their unfamiliar environment in every way possible.

What about women who could not adapt to the 'new' environment of the Depression? Where did the women fit in who had exhausted their resilience in the approaching Depression years? Did women who were unable to adapt, who left their homes, who could not find work, who lost children, or who were alone and unattached, lack resilience? The range of feminist theories and Feminist Standpoint Theory would challenge and disagree. A patriarchal stronghold, as history tells us, dominated societal beliefs in the 1930s. "In societies where power is organized hierarchically (by class, culture, or gender), there is no possibility of an impartial, disinterested, value-neutral perspective" (Swignonski, 1994, p. 388). It could be argued that patriarchy was a major contributor to women's inability to

stay a float during the Depression. Imposing feminist theory on the decade of the thirties would shed a much different light on the times. How would women of history have tolerated the "ism's" that permeated their personal and public lives, had feminist views been widely accepted? How would race and class come into play amid the confusion and desperation of the 1930s? Feminist Standpoint Theory "makes it possible to ask new questions" (Swigonski, 1994).

**Gaps and Limitations in The Literature** The literature reviewed for this study offered an overall description of what life offered many women in the Depression years. The data covered common themes of struggle and of doing what had to be done to get by. Survival was addressed as the central, most important need women and families faced. The literature presented individual situations and stories of how families coped physically, economically, socially, emotionally, and, how the family structure fared. The literature failed to demonstrate resilience as a viable, theoretical construct which appears to have played an enormous role, both individually and collectively, in women's survival during the 1930s. The sources offered no explanation about 'why' or 'how' these women chose to not give up. How was resilience fostered? One hypothesis of this study supports a 'resilience factor' as a viable construct, one that needs extensive research in practice and theory, particularly with adults. Though research on resilience grows each year, the

focus is nearly exclusively targeted toward children. Certainly, this focus is pertinent to helping professions who work with children and to assist in promoting and advocating for the healthy development of children. There is little room to dispute the importance of this research. However, there appears to be a large gap in translating and transforming the value of resilience into the lives of women today, regardless of their age, status, cultural background, economic situation or education. Hypothesis: could teaching women to recognize, become aware of and develop their own resilience, result in higher self-esteem, stronger coping skills, and more careful thought about life choices? These gaps in the literature need to be addressed. Teaching resilience needs to be equated with the importance of teaching academics in schools.

This study considers the gaps and explores variables which may have added strength to the lives of women in the Depression. The study emphasizes the importance and necessity of resilience in continuing to form strength in the lives of women.

**Summary** The literature discussed great hardship and meager living conditions women and their families had to cope with during the Great Depression. Several definitions of resilience are described. Ecological/Systems perspective and Feminist Theory, were offered as ways of connecting women to their innate resilience. Additionally, an hypothesis was



suggested centering on the teaching and recognition of the 'resilience factor' as a viable construct for women. Chapter three will address the methodology of the study.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

What can we learn about resilience from women who survived the great depression?

**Research Design** This qualitative study employed a descriptive design, using content analysis for the purpose of analyzing the data. Motivation for the study came together on three levels. First, the acquisition of sixty years worth of my grandmother's diaries and subsequent reading about her life, secondly, a thirty year interest in women's strengths that have historically gone unacknowledged, and lastly, the concept of women as survivors who are resilient and often able to "bounce back." Since my grandmother was a white, working class woman, as previously noted, the study's focus reflects that specific lifestyle.

Literature searches were conducted using the key words **women, depression, Great Depression** and **resilience**. The search yielded hundreds of articles and books. Sifting through computer printouts, the decision was made to keep only those sources that focused on the **Great Depression** and not clinical **depression**. Another choice kept only sources whose time frame was within the decade of 1930-1940, and that related to women. Several articles about **resilience** resulted, though most related to children, as noted in the literature review, a few sources focused on older women. Using content analysis, the data was organized around several themes produced by the literature review. Research was

considered non-exhaustive and, for the purpose of this study as noted, focused on white, working class women.

**Rationale for Study** As themes became apparent in the literature, so did knowledge about women of the Depression era. The literature discussed numerous hardships, traumas and horrific conditions with which women were forced to cope. Most working-class women had heavy role expectations placed upon them by society, institutions and family. The skills women possessed such as working and organizing, sewing or bartering may have supported their resilience, hence their survival. The literature produced data supporting the fact that women learned to cope, to survive (Bauman & Coode, 1988; Evans, 1989; Helmbold, 1987; Hofstad, 1930). What the literature was not able to articulate was "how" women of the Depression survived. This study offered data that reflects "how" women made it through the thirties individually and collectively. The study discussed "where" women's resilience came from and "what" or "who" helped them to survive.

**Defining Variables** For the purpose of this study the key variable was resilience. The variable was measured by observing through the literature, methods women used to enable survival for themselves and their families. Resilience was measured by women's ability or inability to adapt and what they did to survive. Sewing clothes out of flour sacks or feed bags or remaking clothes from badly worn

ones, bartering for food, rent or work, applying for relief, standing in soup lines, taking in laundry or boarders, and doing 'whatever it took,' demonstrated women's adaptability. Resilience was also measured by looking at women's ability to "bounce back; buoyancy; recover strengths, spirits and good humor, etc., quickly" (American Heritage Dictionary, 1983), and to not give up. Examples of characteristics of resilience, to bounce back, were discussed in the body of the paper. Of the many variables that affected women's survival, the presence, or not, of supportive networks, relationships, and organizing skills ranked high on the list. Whether women had close family members or were disconnected, factored into the resilience equation.

**Study Population** The study population was gathered from written historical documents. Several documents utilized were primary sources, most were secondary sources. Recorded in the data was a myriad of characteristics women of the thirties possessed. They were mothers, grandmothers, children, sisters, married, unmarried, unattached, abandoned, widowed, unemployed and employed. The women came from varied ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds and lived from coast to coast across the United States. In general, the study population reflected a white working-class lifestyle and ranged in age from children to senior citizens.

**Sample** For the purposes of this study, the units of analysis were historical records depicting the Great Depression and the decade of the 1930s. The sample also contained units of analysis from published research. The historical data was gathered from a variety of sources including journal articles, encyclopedias and books. Primary sources comprising personal papers, original case notes, letters and diaries were included. A portion of the sample was obtained through five literature searches conducted at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and at Saint Olaf and Carleton Colleges in Northfield, Minnesota. Some historical records came from the Social Welfare Archives at the Walter Library on the University of Minnesota's Minneapolis campus. Units of analysis from this sample were an archival book, Some Folks Won't Work (1930) by Clinch Calkins, and original cases notes, Case Studies of Unemployment (1931). Other resources were gathered from the Minnesota History Center in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where permission was needed from a daughter to access her mother's personal papers, letters and other documents. Another historical source, sixty years worth of grandmother's diaries, was located at this author's home where most of the research was conducted. All data in this study came from written communications, most of which is published. The sample contained some forty sources and was used to investigate the depression years, resilience, and women's ability or inability to survive the times.

**Measurement Issues** Content analysis was chosen because it allow for studying processes occurring over long periods of time (Rubin & Babbie, 1993), which is necessary for an historical study. This method also provides for organizing the data in categories and subsets (Patton, 1987; Rubin & Babbie, 1993). Content analysis limited the use of data to recorded communications. Questions of validity were raised about the existing data in that "measurements may not be altogether valid representations of the variables and concepts you want to draw conclusions about" (Rubin & Babbie, 1993, p. 419). Since the data in this study is historical, there is no way to validate or generalize the information. For example, women depicted as resilient may not have been resilient but simply following what they saw others do. One cannot go back and ask these same women how they managed.

Questions of reliability were present in the study. Again, being historical, there would be no way to gage the accuracy of the reported circumstances of any given situation during the Depression years. Were some events under-reported or did the extraordinary events of the Depression influence the way the information was reported? Harry Hopkins, a government employed social worker, sent other workers out across the country to report back to him what they saw happening. Some sources stated negative judgments were made by those workers regarding the families they observed, and whether they were deserving or undeserving poor. Hence, the

reporting back was more exaggerated (Evans, 1989; Trattner, 1994).

Measurement error occurs when the collected information casts a false image of the concept being measured (Rubin & Babbie, 1993). From the standpoint that this studies' focus includes only white-working-class women, the collected information may cast a false image regarding women of the Depression years. That is, the information may sound as though it refers to all women of the thirties. In reality it refers to only the women who were part of the white-working-class. This example indeed reflects measurement error. Systematic error most likely occurred in the collection process as well because of personal bias. In the author's effort to share some of her grandmother's story, she may have missed other relevant or valuable data. She may also have searched closely for resilient factors while neglecting factors that disputed resilience.

**Data Collection** The first task in the data collection was deciphering some one hundred fifty abstracts printed out from the literature searches. Sources containing the key words **resilience, Great Depression, women,** and any titles that sounded applicable were pursued. Books and journal articles through inner-library loan came from outside libraries. Sources available at the selected libraries were checked out or copied. Sources at the Walter Library and the Minnesota History Center were viewed, noted and or copied on the

premises; the original sources were not taken out of the facilities. Family diaries were located in the author's home where they became part of the sample. Initial reading of the sample and data collection began in October, 1996.

Collection of data occurred by recording on notecards any quotes, sentences, phrases, words, situations, or portions of individuals' stories that reflected definitions of the variables. Key descriptive words and phrases such as *strength, fortitude, resilience, making do, keep going, no choice, just went on, took each day as it came, and courage* are examples of what the author looked for in determining the usefulness of the data. Each source was referenced by title and author with its own notecard(s). Information, words, phrases, etc., from that article, book, diary or paper, was recorded onto the corresponding notecard. In the process of recording and collecting, several themes began to emerge. Eight specific themes were then recorded onto a second set of note cards. During the process of re-reading the data a second and third time, the author of the source and a page number were recorded under the appropriate theme heading on the second set of notecards.

**Data Analysis** When using content analysis, data reviewed is limited to recorded communication only. In this historical study, information was gathered from written communication which made content analysis appropriate.



Several themes emerged during the literature review and data collection phase. These themes or patterns depicted women in several lights, the first three being the most prominent: 1] women had *relationship networks*, and supported one another; 2] women were *organized and organizers*; 3] women were *scapegoated* and blamed primarily for taking jobs away from men; 4] women were *laborers*; 5] women were *discriminated against or ignored*; 6] women had *strength and fortitude*, were seen as political survivors; 7] *unemployed* women were nearly *invisible*; 8] and women had a sense of *faith*. These themes allowed the data to be pulled together, organized and classified. For example, women in relationship, networking and supporting one another, was a motif noted in ten different sources. Women being in relationship appeared to play a primary role in sustaining women's resilience. The classification of the data brought together information that became the foundation of the study.

**Human Subjects** Human subjects were not used as part of this study, therefore no protection measures were necessary. There were no pretest/post-tests conducted which lead the Institutional Review Board to classify the study's status as exempt from IRB review. One set of personal papers, manuscripts and letters was held at the Minnesota Historical Society. Approval from the daughter of Meridel LeSueur, who was recently deceased, was needed for access to her mother's papers. To that end, a consent form was signed by this

author and that family member, a copy of which is included in Appendix A. Sixty years worth of diaries recorded by this author's deceased grandmother was an important part of the study. Gladys Johnson Hofstad spent her young adulthood in the Depression years, and was another source for which no permission or consent was required since the diaries belong to the author.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

**Overview** The results of this study add information to the current pool of sources describing the phenomenon of the Great Depression, and its historical impact on women. The study shares the loss and desperation as well as the stamina and the strength displayed by women of the Great Depression. Women experienced extreme hardship and demonstrated extreme resourcefulness individually and collectively as they journeyed through the Great Depression.

Findings of the study produced several indications of strengths-based attributes in Depression women. The study gave evidence, based on the literature review and theoretical concepts, that various attributes aided resilience in women of the Depression. The attributes supported resilience, and resilience improved women's abilities to cope with adversity.

Attributes that surfaced such as, resourcefulness, ability to bounce back, displaying courage, emotional stamina and adaptability ( Cayton, Gorn & Williams, 1993; Helmbold, 1987; Wagnild & Young, 1990), centered around eight themes that became apparent in reviewing the literature. The themes were: *women had relationship networks and supported one another, women were organizers, were laborers, were scapegoated and blamed for taking away men's jobs, women were discriminated against, had strength and fortitude politically, had a sense of faith, and, if unemployed were nearly invisible.* These frameworks were merged to create three distinct themes. The first focused on women forming

*relationship networks*, both formally and informally, *supporting* one another. The second theme encompassed women as *laborers* and *organizers*, politically, in faith, in families, and in the paid labor force. The third theme explained women as being *scapegoated*, *discriminated against* and as *invisible* (Bauman, 1988; Bennett & Elder, 1979; Evans, 1989; Helmbold, 1987; LeSueur, 1982; Moloney, 1995; O'Gorman, 1994; Orleck, 1993; Trolander, 1975; Wagnild & Young, 1990; Watkins, 1993; Westin, 1976 and Woloch, 1984).

**Major Findings** Findings of the study indicate that women mobilizing survival skills often occurred in relationship with others. The data clearly point to women's strength in organizing themselves around strikes and demonstrations while being scapegoated and discriminated against. Women networked and supported one another in bartering, Settlement Houses and in communities of faith, "many thirties women found church offered more solace for their souls. If church could not feed hungry bellies, it could nourish many hungry souls" (Westin, 1976, p. 241). The study found that women of the Depression supported one another, often through suffering, and found strength in the process. "...it's the suffering of endless labor without dream, eating the spare bread in bitterness, it's being a slave without the security of a slave" (LeSueur, 1977, p. 8). LeSueur saw suffering not as negative and passive but as "a source of solidarity" (LeSueur, 1982, p. 11).

Regardless of whether women suffered family break-up, children forced to leave school, moving in with other families, becoming employed or unemployed, begging for flour or food, asking to be put on relief, they did so with support of other women. Informal groups of women planted, quilted, protested, found solace in faith, and in countless other ways, survived in relationship with others, "uncertain times of the Depression decade drew women together in companionship" (Westin, 1976, p. 243). Some of those who did not survive, disappeared and/or committed suicide (Bauman & Coode, 1988; Evans, 1989; LeSueur 1977; and Trolander, 1975). The literature shows time after time, year after year in that decade, many women were able to "recover their strength,... after being pressed or stretched" (American Heritage Dictionary, 1983). Though women suffered countless losses they learned to keep going in spite of the times. Women "displayed courage and adaptability in the wake of life's misfortunes" (Wagnild & Young, 1990, p. 254). The findings show that women demonstrated resilience that was supported through being in relationship with other women.

**Resilience** The research explained *resilience* and *protective factors* that are believed to insulate individuals from long term harm. Several studies were done with children, who were at risk of potential harm psychologically and/or physically. The results seemed to indicate that when certain protective factors were present in a child's life, that child was in a

better position to shake off or withstand harm. Referring to adults who have survived potentially harmful childhoods, O'Gorman points out, "a certain amount of stress strengthens our psychological resilience and increases our ability to handle greater and greater challenges" (1994, p. 3).

Other findings regarding resilience point to a combination of many factors. The National Advisory Mental Health Council reports, "studies to date suggest that there is no single source of resilience or vulnerability. Rather, many interacting factors come into play such as, genetic predisposition, social skills and self-esteem" (1996, p. 22).

According to the literature, social skills and self-esteem were very much a part of women surviving the thirties, as was self-sacrifice. Self-sacrifice, putting one's own needs last and traditionally providing psychological sustenance for family members was a way of life in the thirties. "Although many families effectively sheltered their members and remained in tact,...too many families emerged from the storm physically and emotionally debilitated" (Bauman & Coode, 1988, p. 93). Self-sacrifice was a noble and religiously supported valued in the Depression culture. Several studies (Garmezy, 1986; National Advisory Mental Health Council, 1996; Rutter, 1987) have discussed the concept of stress/adaptation, vulnerability/risk, vulnerability factors/protective factors, as being opposite sides of the same coin. Findings in this study suggest that resilience/self-sacrifice may be opposite

sides on the same coin. This perception aligns with the research.

**Theoretical Concepts** The study also found that both Ecological/Systems theory and Feminist Standpoint theory had strong implications toward resilience. Ecological theory studies the relationship between organisms, for the purpose of this study that being women, and their environment, the Great Depression. The conceptual framework looks at "relationship between paired variables (does the environment cause the person to behave in a certain way?), as opposed to a cause-and-effect relationship" (Compton & Galoway, 1994, p. 118). Findings indicate a strong relationship between women of the thirties and the times of the Depression. The Depression environment caused women to behave in increasingly resourceful ways, ways which they would not have behaved under normal circumstances. For example, sewing clothing out of feed and flour sacks did not normally occur for most women. Purchasing fabric to sew with would have been the usual routine.

Ecological/Systems theory is strongly grounded in "adaptability" both as individuals adapting to their environment and the environment adapting to the individual (Compton & Galoway, 1994). Adaptability was demonstrated over and over again by women of the thirties. They continually "influenced, shaped, and sometimes changed each other" (Germain, 1991, p. 16). They adapted by organizing, by

networking and developing supportive relationships. They adapted by learning to live with much less in their lives or to "do without" altogether, "Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without" (Westin, 1976, p. ix). Women's ability to adapt, to stretch and bend with the times clearly demonstrates their resilience.

Feminist Standpoint theory believes that, "knowledge is meant to be grounded in experience" (Saulnier, 1996, p. 140), and that, "less powerful members of society experience a different reality as a consequence of their oppression" (Swigonski, 1994, p. 390). It is clear from the literature that women were considered less powerful than men and not taken seriously. Women were scapegoated and discriminated against during the Depression years (Bauman & Coode, 1988; Evans, 1989; Helmbold, 1987; Orleck, 1993). Because women were discriminated against, they in turn had less power "Relief programs often discriminated against women by refusing jobs to married women or providing only stereotypically female jobs like sewing, and paying them especially low wages" (Evans, 1989, p. 210). Women were less powerful but were also ripe with knowledge, grounded in their individual and collective experiences.

**Relation to Research Question** The findings of this study relate directly to the research question, "What can we learn about resilience from women who survived the Great Depression?," in several ways. Resilience as a human



attribute, is sometimes a non-tangible concept. That is, even though evidence of resilience was visible in the survival actions of the thirties women, it was not a concrete asset that could be held. Women journeyed through those traumatic years in ways that generated a plethora of stories describing resilience. Concrete evidence naming "how" survival was accomplished on the emotional level did not surface in this study. Women who survived the Great Depression yielded a rich mixture of knowledge and experience which will be discussed in the final chapter.

**Summary** This chapter has given an overview of major findings in the research. It has pulled together the themes that emerged from the literature, combining the data into three specific themes about women of the Depression: they developed supportive relationship networks, they were organized and organizers, and they were scapegoated. The chapter ties together the data and the findings giving relevance to the research question. Discussion of the findings will continue in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

**Key Findings** As human beings, we are incredibly complex organisms. At the micro level, individual cells combine to work together, forming a biologically functioning system. The systems work together, adapting to changes in their environment, their "relationship is characterized by continuous reciprocal exchanges" (Germain, 1991, p. 17). Each system has its job to do individually but has adapted so that working together is not only possible but preferable.

At the macro level of individual human systems, women of the thirties did adapt, coming together to "influence, shape, and sometimes change each other", as Germain (1991, p. 17) recognizes in defining Ecological/Systems theory. Women did an inordinate amount of adapting to and through the Depression. Women were resilient....primarily because they were able to maintain relationship with other women; this appears to be the key finding. Networks of female friends who shared common experiences had mutual support and understanding which they supplied one another (Evans, 1989; Trolander, 1975). It was relationship and connection with other women that supported and contributed to resilience. Resilience was vitally important then and is vitally important today for all women of all ages.

Recognizing the value and importance of resilience as well as the need for more research on resilience are also important findings. If having the attribute resilience was a major factor in survival for women of the Depression years,

what role could resilience play in the lives of women and young girls today who may be out of touch with this piece of themselves? How would the resilience factor play into teen pregnancy, or physical and sexual violence against women today?

**Strengths and Limitations of Study** This study has presented a focused picture of women of the Great Depression. It has observed and named women's ability to survive as a strength; a positive attribute. The data has focused on women of the Depression and has been examined through two differing theoretical frameworks. A valuable strength advanced by research on resilience, gives voice to the legacy women of the Depression Era have discretely left. It behooves us as professionals to pay attention, and listen to what we can learn from our foremothers who helped shape our lives today. A final strength in this limited focus sees the review as one piece of a future, larger study, exploring other groups of women and their sources of strength. The theories presented have provided additional support for women of the nineties and perhaps for women of the twenty-first century.

There were several limitations to the study. Already addressed in the body of the work, the limitation of validity and reliability in the historical literature exists. The study focused heavily on gaining positive experience in the negative wake of the Depression. The study included a fewer

number of negative outcomes, limiting the balance of the study. Using examples of women from the white working-class, even with the added acknowledgment, leaves many other women's stories untold, a limitation of the study. The results of the study are hard to generalize in that it looks at a unique period in time. In today's society, there are numerous social support systems in place which did not exist for women of the Depression years. The study is also limited by the large amount of data the Depression era covers. Each theme suggested by the data could stand alone as a research topic.

### **Implications for Social Work Policy and Practice**

The data presented reflect the means women used to survive the trauma of the Great Depression. As noted, the study defined resilience and observed how women utilized this attribute as a survival mechanism. The data offer positive implications for both social work policy and practice. For example, adapting the two theoretical concepts, Ecological/Systems and Feminist Standpoint, could assist social workers in their practice. Advocating for female clients as feminist theory suggests, by helping them recognize the wealth of knowledge and life experience they have, could build positive self-esteem. In doing so, women would be building up their stores of resilience which would serve to better guide the choices they make. These concepts could be especially useful with females who are unaware of their strengths, or believe they have little to offer themselves or their community.

Feminist Standpoint "encompasses social work's more inclusive commitment to the empowerment of all oppressed groups.....and is an approach that is more consonant with the professional values and goals of social work" (Swigonski, 1994, p. 390). Additionally, standpoint theory is person focused believing "members of marginalized groups are valuable strangers to the social order" (Swigonski, 1994, p. 392). Standpoint theory blends exceptionally well with Ecological/Systems theory. As Swigonski (1994) states of feminist standpoint, it is "a scientific approach that recognizes the social bond and the reciprocal nature of interactions between people in social contexts, would be more consistent with assumptions of social work practice" (p. 388). These assumptions could advance social work with teen pregnancy and physically/sexually abused or battered women by offering them strength, based on their knowledge and their standpoint in life's experience. From an ecological perspective of adapting to and having reciprocal exchanges with their environments, women can learn to adapt. Women of any age not only learn from where they have been, but can also gain knowledge about their own potential, "...certain components of resilience can be taught and reinforced, modeled and learned" (Guetzloe, 1994, p. 4).

Logically, ecological and feminist theories could be powerful tools to impact public policy. More research on the effects of ecological and feminist theories as intervention and practice tools needs to happen. The research should

include any correlation between intervention and bolstering resilience. The other pertinent piece of research needs to examine the role relationships, particularly female relationships, play in fostering resilience outside the walls of the Great Depression. The benefits of research on social policy effecting women could have profound consequences, intentional and unintentional, in the lives and futures of women of all ages.

**Conclusions and Recommendations** Women of the Great Depression were survivors. They reached into their inner resources, and almost in spite of themselves and the circumstances, continued to "make do." They moved through the Great Depression in ways women of the nineties often have difficulty comprehending. Many women of the thirties were socially active in their search for ways to ease the stressful Depression years. Women moved individually and collectively through the thirties with incredible resourcefulness and stamina. Women have strength and resilience. They are an untapped natural resource. Women are a powerful, intuitive human energy, many whom have stoically acquiesced in a longstanding patriarchal society. Women are a force to be reckoned and reconciled with, in a more balanced social structure, as we move into the twenty first century.

What have we learned from the legacy of "making do?" Can that history support women into the twenty-first century?

Strength inherent in depression women's stories of survival is vital to women today as is the opposite side of the legacy, self-sacrifice. Society, religions, families and other institutions have helped promote the message of self-sacrifice so well that in today's society, it has become pathologized as "co-dependency". The Johnson Institute defines this co-dependency trait as, "a set of maladaptive, compulsive behaviors learned by family members to survive in a family experiencing great emotional pain and stress...behaviors passed on from generation to generation" (1987). A trait that at one time was useful and necessary has become a way of blaming and victimizing women.

**Summary** This historical review briefly described skills women utilized to support their resilience and survival, during the years of the Great Depression. The literature discussed the extremities of hardship, loss and meager living conditions many women and families experienced. This study examined resilience and attributes that supported resilience in women during the decade of the thirties. "Some of these variables are external/ environmental and others are internal/intrapsychic" (Richie, 1995). The external/ environmental traits were noticeably visible as women responded to and interacted with what was happening around them. The internal/intrapsychic traits were strikingly evident in stories of suicide and withdrawal (LeSueur, 1977).

The concept of resilience was defined and examined in the light of two theories, Ecological/Systems and Feminist Standpoint. Several studies on resilience and children were used to support the concepts. Researchers in the field of resilience believe children may be born with protective factors that buffer risk (Benson, 1993; Garmezy & Masten, 1986; Guetzloe, 1994). Moloney (1995) suggests women's stories have the potential to provide other women with positive models of life experience. She goes on to state there is a "fundamental underlying belief that all women in our culture possess the potential for inner strength" and that its developed "through living in the world" (p. 104).



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Statement of Project: Thesis: gathering information regarding women who survived the Great Depression — what can we learn from the resilience of women and the relationships they maintained?

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**MASTER'S THESIS**

**What Can We Learn About Resilience  
From Women Who Survived The Great Depression?**

**May 8, 1997**

**by Vicky Follansbee**

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